

[The Dybbuk of Bunker Street]

FOLKLORE

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FORM C

Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE Illinois

NAME OF WORKER Hilda Polacheck

ADDRESS 1410 East 57th Street.

DATE July 6, 1939

SUBJECT The Dybbuk of Bunker Street

NAME OF INFORMANT

Yes, I remember the story of the Dybbuk of Bunker Street. It was back in 1902, when the story got around that a dybbuk was going from house to house, making people sick. I was just eight years old then; my mother wanted to have a birthday-party for me, but she didn't have enough money, so she took me to a nickel-show. On the way home, she told me she would buy some ice-cream for supper. But when we got home, our small kitchen was crowded with neighbors. My father had been brought home from the clothing factory where he worked. I remember seeing him in bed. He looked very pale. I heard the women saying something about the dybbuk having gotten into him. My mother ran for the doctor and I

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was told to go out and pray. But I sat on the steps of the dark hall just outside the kitchen. Two old women came into the hall. I guess they did not see me. I heard one of them say: "if a dybbuk gets into a God fearing person, and a holy Rabbi can be found who knows how to force the dybbuk out of the body, the person will get well. But if the dybbuk gets into a sinner, who does not eat kosher food and who does not daven, (pray) he hasn't got a chance. He will die."

Two days later my father was dead. I did not [thing?] he was a sinner. I did not think he had time to be a sinner. He worked every day and ate all his meals at home. And my mother cooked only kosher food. I did not understand the whole business.

My mother got a job in the factory where my father worked, but she did not earn as much as he had. She used to [get?] me ready for school before she went work in the morning and give me a penny for a roll. This was my lunch. After school I played on the street or in the dirty alley, till my mother came home.

I remember that house on Bunker Street where the dybbuk was supposed to go from place to place. That house was built for one family, but when we lived there, six families were living in the house. No one had a bath room. There was one toilet in the hall for the six families, and some of them had as many as six or eight kids.

When my father was alive and my mother did not have to go to work, she used to bathe me in a wash tub in the kitchen. We had two rooms, a bedroom and a kitchen. She used to keep my clothes clean. I remember I had a white blouse with embroidery ruffles on the collar and the cuffs. It would take my mother an hour to iron this shirt, but she did not mind it. She used to heat the iron on a coal stove and it took a long time to get the iron hot. She used to like to dress me up on Saturdays and take me for a walk to look in the windows of the big store on Halsted Street. But she got awful mean after my father died. All she did in the evening was cry and fight with me. She stopped bathing me and I never wore that

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white blouse again. Sometimes I used to wonder if the dybbuk got into my mother. Maybe she was tired.

We had many Irish neighbors and a lot of them were sick, too. But the old Jewish women said that the dybbuk only made Jews sick. I used to play with a little Irish boy who was in my room in school. He lived next door to us. He [had?] three brothers and two sisters, and the whole family got sick. They all died except the little boy. He'd a been better off if he had died. When he was ten years old he was sent to reform school. He was in jail most of his life.

Do I believe it was a dybbuk? Well, I don't know. It must a been something that made people sick and mean. My mother did not get sick, but she was plenty mean. I got sick of hearing her fight, and when I was twelve, I ran away from home. One day I was hungry, so I stole two apples from the grocery stand. The grocery man caught me, and I was sent to reform school. The first time my mother came to see me, in the reform school, she said the dybbuk must have gotten into me. I guess she felt bad when I was sent to reform school. She used to bring me apples and sometimes an orange.

I remember another dybbuk story which the old women used to tell. A few doors from where we lived, there was a large stable where the horses and wagons of a large department store on State Street, used to be kept. Every morning the drivers used to hitch the horses to the wagons and go down town to get the wagons loaded for deliveries. They used to deliver goods all over. Sometimes they went to Evanston and as far north as Highland Park. Well, one of the drivers lived on bunker Street, and he started out to deliver goods. On the way he took sick and he was brought home. That evening some women came to see my mother, and I heard them say that the dybbuk surely had the driver. I was out on the street near the stable when the horses and wagon came back from the day's deliveries and I heard the driver tell one of the other men that the people in Evanston to whom he had delivered goods, were sick, too. "Do you think the dybbuk traveled to Evanston?" he asked laughing.

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A couple of weeks later, some ladies came around the they looked at all the houses and there was some talk that the flies brought the sickness. But the old women stuck to their dybbuk. They said that a dybbuk can enter the smallest and the largest thing. So maybe the dybbuk got into the flies. The flies may have stayed on the horses, or the harness and that is how the sickness got [to?] Evanston. Then a few weeks later, I heard one of the drivers say that [t?] people in Evanston, called the sickness typhoid fever. That they had found out that Bunker Street was overcrowded. That so many people using one toilet made the water back up after heavy rains and then the flies were all over the toilets, and then they flow into the houses and got on the food and that is what caused the sickness.

But the best dybbuk story of all was the one about a young Jewish girl[?] who ran away with a young Irish feller. Everybody on Bunker Street was having fits. The Jews said the dybbuk would surely get into the girl, and the Irish said that some devil would get the feller. But the girl's father got sick and died and the feller's two sisters and mother died from the same sickness, but nothing happened to the girl and the feller. So the story of the dybbuk was gradually forgotten.

All I got to say is that whether it was a dybbuk or typhoid fever, all my hard luck started when my father died. If I hadn't been sent to reform school, I wouldn't have landed in jail. Yes, I served ten years. When I came out of reform school, I was sixteen years old. I went to live with my mother, but she kept throwing it up to me that I disgraced her by being sent to reform school, so I lit out and ran away. There was a gang hanging around Bunker Street and I joined them. We used to steal anything we could lay our hands on, then spend the money on eating, drinking and going to burlesque shows. Sometimes we got arrested, but one of the big shots used to get us out. I use to pass the house once in a while, where my mother lived, but I never went in. Then I heard she died and the relatives buried her. They did not tell me about it, so I was not at the funeral. I can never forget that.

Well, one day I was caught sticking up a man with a gun in my hand, and the big shot could not get me off. So I was sent up for [ten?] years. When I came out, I went to see an

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uncle. He told me that my mother had left me five hundred dollars from a lodge policy. I was sick of the life I was living, so I took the money and opened a little cigar store. And as you see, I still have the store. I make enough to live on.

Just the other day, one of the old neighbors came into the store. What do you think we talked about? The Dybbuk of Bunker Street.